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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

From A To B

BY

Trevor N. Dekort

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring, 1994

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *From A To B* submitted by Trevor N. Dekort in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

B. Almon (Supervisor)

B. Mitchell

R. Sinclair

To Bert and Gail Dekort, my parents
and to my wife, Cindy.

Abstract

In this collection of poems the poet explores various kinds of boundaries as well as the actions of removing or crossing them. Sometimes the result of this exploration is an increased awareness of the distinction between bordered areas, and sometimes the result is a blurring of those distinctions. Areas of interest include such things as reality, fiction, notions of time, gender, life, death, and rural and urban living. Drawing on his own experiences as a smalltown teenager and beginning writer who moves to the city to study literature and grow into an adult, the poet also examines what it means to move from point to point. "Points" in this poetical landscape refer not only to physical or temporal location but stages in thought or phases in spiritual growth. The collection highlights significant moments during the poet's journey from ignorance to understanding, from innocence to experience, and from adolescence to adulthood.

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Introduction

I first started writing poetry in grade seven. Prior to that I couldn't stand the stuff. I'd prefer to write humorous or science fiction stories, especially in grade six since if they were good I'd get to read them to the class. But in grade seven I had a new Language Arts teacher who required each of her students to keep a journal. Each week we had to write one page of anything. It could be diary-like entries, stories, essays, songs, poems, speeches—it didn't matter. I still liked to write stories but was not always able to produce fiction on demand regularly every week. So I started handing in some poem entries since poetry was much easier to write and it could fill up a page quicker. I got some good comments on them so I wrote more. I entered the Alberta Poetry Yearbook contests and had some poems published! By the time I reached high school I hardly wrote stories at all.

Since then, writing poetry has become much more difficult, seemingly taking forever to fill a page, so my original motivations are not the reasons I keep at it. Sometimes I'm not sure why I still do it. Often there seems to be no good reason. Most of my friends don't care for it, or don't understand it. There's no money in it. It takes a lot of time and postage to place it in magazines that nobody in my family subscribes to. It's hard work. It's frustrating.

I guess I do it primarily because of a need to say *precisely*, and I just can't do it in conversation or fiction. And a few key people have convinced me that I have a God-given gift so I feel obligated to use it. Like the colour blue, I just like it.

I like the sound of words going right as they fall into lines of communication.

In these poems, I was mostly concerned with exploring various kinds of boundaries (which often turn out to be bridges), as well as the patches of grass on either side of those fences. These boundaries include such things as memory (which comes between the past and the present), or time itself (the fluid between all points on our personal timelines). Sometimes, too, the boundaries are not clear, and I find an entry into a poem through examination of these moments of blurred

distinctions. I am fascinated by grey areas and unanswerable questions like, at what point does the cheek become the chin, when does fiction become reality, when does love become not-love? The moments when one moves from one point to another—be it phases in one's understanding, transitional experiences in one's life-journey, stages in a relationship, or simply different perspectives—interest me greatly. I like to explore the implications of movement between these points, to see what happens when the fence is hopped, the bridge crossed, as much as I like to destroy fences and blend previously separated territory.

I suppose these interests are almost inescapable given my background. I grew up on a farm near a smalltown called Grimshaw and I left my heart there when I came to the city to attend university six years ago. My closest friends in kindergarten were still close in grade twelve, as they are now. I was the only one of those boys I grew up with to go to university, the only one who developed a love for reading and writing. So I function in an intellectual community of English grad students and professors, mimic their language at times, but I feel more at home with the conversations of my smalltown friends and their conventions. Yet getting an education, crossing that boundary from ignorance to enlightenment, has altered me forever. My university experience stays with me when I go back home so that, just like a grown man returning to the house of his youth, everything seems smaller than I remember it. I love that smalltown but I can't love it as much as I once did because it does not embrace all of my experience or all of who I am. I find myself sometimes mimicking its language, suppressing unacceptable words, or deliberately forgetting my recent history. I feel like a walking grey area.

In my literary taste too I've found myself between two worlds. The poets to whom I first turned to learn my craft weren't what most would consider poets at all but were songwriters. I admired the lyrics of writers such as Paul Simon, Neil Peart of Rush, Stevie Nicks, and of course, John Cougar Mellencamp. Simon taught me about rhythm and the music of inventive phrases with his *Graceland* album. Peart taught me about precision and rhyme. Nicks made me believe in the creative power of the intuition, and of emotion. She also showed me how to move beyond the first person stance in a poem with her third person portraits of personal experiences. Mellencamp gave me the courage to believe in the importance of the

smalltown and he made me proud of my country roots. These poets are not part of the "literary tradition" on which I'm expected to feed. However, I *have* been influenced by writers that are part of that tradition, such as John Milton, William Wordsworth, P.K. Page, Robert Kroetsch, F.R. Scott, Timothy Findley, Ethel Wilson, and Flannery O'Connor. These writers have been part of my university education, and I like to think their best qualities have taught me to write better.

But my other major influences when I was a beginning writer in my teens, free from the confines of reading lists, were Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut, both writers who have generally not been considered important by the people responsible for my post-secondary study. Bradbury's writing is so wonderfully extravagant, full of fantasy, love, and poetry. He believes in writing from the gut. He believes that his stories are important and that human beings are important. He never tries to jump on a theoretical bandwagon or impress professors or other book reviewers with postmodern tricks or Lacanian plots. Likewise, Vonnegut writes with complete disregard for how one is "supposed to write," as he was taught in creative writing classes. He too loves human beings, corrupt as they often are. Both writers believe that they have a responsibility to improve society, to speak out against its faults, and to celebrate its achievements. Above all they believe they have a responsibility to communicate.

Some have criticized my writing as being too simple or too "folksy", but I want people to spend more time reading my words than reading the dictionary. I don't want to put up roadblocks to communication or play smoke-and-mirrors. There are too many poets and critics spending too much time navel-gazing into their own alphabet, more concerned with linguistics and theories, and not about people. Too many signifiers have been wasted telling us how signifiers can't really signify anything. Writing is not always about writing. It is primarily about people.

These poems are about people I have known or observed in my life, and they are about me. For the most part my poetry is very autobiographical, keeping in mind the axiom "Never let the facts get in the way of a good poem." I have arranged the poems to form a narrative of my own journey from town to city, from innocence to experience, from ignorance to understanding. This arrangement follows a *loose* chronological order (with flashbacks and interludes) according to

the occurrence of the events they describe. As well, many poems are arranged in clusters of similar themes or motifs.

Because of my desire to be accessible I don't want to require the reader to be familiar with a particular school of poetry to understand my work. However, in order to appreciate it better, it does help to be aware of the way I use line-breaks. For me, there is a slight pause that occurs at the end of a line. This pause emphasizes the last word in that line and (to a lesser degree) the first word in the next, enabling me to create double-meanings as well as ambiguities. Sometimes the pause serves to highlight a surprising turn of expression or revelation. (I use spaces within lines, instead of commas, to indicates pauses that have these same effects.) Of course, these pauses also serve a rhythmic purpose, rhythm being one of the principal ways to attract the reader and keep his/her interest.

Now let me tell you about a miracle.

When I was sixteen we stayed with some friends of the family that we hadn't seen in years. In the time between contact these friends' lives had become infested with spirits. Relatives and friends who visited their home reported seeing ghosts, hearing strange voices, feeling blasts of cold air come from nowhere. The man of the house (it was a couple with a daughter in her twenties, and an eighteen year old son) told us how a demon gave him information about his business, and enabled him to read people's thoughts. "Nobody ever bounces a cheque on me 'cause I know before they even write it whether it will be good or not." He bragged that his son could never lie to him because he could read his mind. He said that he could even have the lotto 6-49 numbers if he wanted, but he was afraid to get that much into debt—because the demon would expect something large in return. My mother asked him where he stood spiritually. He explained to us that he was on the fence—unable to give his heart to Christ or the Devil. My mother explained that being on the fence was indeed siding with the Devil.

My (two younger) sisters and I were afraid to be alone in that house because it literally gave us the chills. Even my father was a little uneasy. When I was younger and we'd visit these friends I'd often been afraid to be alone in a room in their house. Now I knew why.

Our first night with them I slept in a camper on the back lawn with their son. I was very afraid and I prayed to God to protect me. Sometime during the night I got up to go to the bathroom and as I went to open the camper door I saw a brilliant blue cross shining through its window. The door had one of those non transparent windows in it, through which only strong light penetrated, revealing blurred shapes. But here was this beautiful cross of intricate blue lines, like something drawn by a medieval scribe. I opened the door to see what could possibly be its source and the cross disappeared. It did not disappear slowly, or gradually transform, as the angle of the opening door altered the refraction of the light from its source. It was there one moment and simply gone the next. Outside, the only light I could see was a weak yellowish-orange streetlight. When I closed the door the blue cross came back. I called Glen over to look at it and he couldn't figure it out either. It hadn't been there earlier in the evening so it wasn't a design etched in the window itself, and the only light out was not blue. We couldn't explain it so we just went to sleep. Like babies. We stayed there the next night as well, but we didn't see the cross again.

A professor once remarked there was a lot of "God" in my poems. I was surprised. I hadn't really noticed. I recognize now, that although my faith often couldn't move a molehill—and that I often question it—a faith is still there. It grows out of this miracle, twelve years of education in the Roman Catholic school system, and an extended family comprised of a number of born-again Christians. It manifests itself in the topics I choose for my poetry. However, like Amy Grant, whose lyrics of late have not been overtly "Christian", I want to communicate my experiences as a human being—not preach a gospel.

Oh me of little faith—and I don't even care for moving mountains, I just want to move you.

Railway Ties

John A. Macdonald never knew
high school in northern alberta
though he could drink
which is half-way there i guess

heavy metal wasn't the same back then
just iron horse on the line of steel

but he loved a woman
& cried when she was gone

* * *

back from university
i was visiting two old classmates
she was smoking hash he laughing
because i wasn't
("i thought you were gettin' a higher education!")
INXS on the stereo
telling us "what you need what you need"
    in my mind
    ACDC's "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap"
    & the image of dynamite blasted rock
    chinese coolies dying
    & a man in parliament drinking vodka
    who never knew
my friend sitting there drinking beer
in an old house
in a small town
in a big forest
600 miles from the capital of any province
telling me he'll vote reform next time
if he votes

(in high school i drank vodka & orange juice
at the parties we all drank instead of doing
nothing)

today i sit among autumn poplar leaves
at the u of a
thinking about maples & ottawa
& the high school sweetheart i married
& a drunk scot somehow
building that town for us loving
the land looking forward
to a future
after his wife's death
reaching out with the railroad to the

isolation

  the loneliness with which we turned
  to the liquor control board
  heavy metal bands bars drugs
  explosive devices in our lives
  that claimed some
in that northern town John A. never knew
his thread of personal history touches
ours his lonely grief
mixed in with a vodka & orange juice
or curling with the smoke from a hashpipe
i can't help but breathe
a century a day a second
away from his ottawa

where he loved

Juxtapositioned

105th street
the motorized oxen move slowly up the steep incline
their yoke is gravity
exhaust the breath of their labour
exhausting hope for fresh air

above
dark clouds dabble in drizzle
sprinkling the city with their innovations

the sun
a forgotten spectacle among the early evening drab buildings
shadows settle after their conquest
reigning in the dark ages of wet sidewalk sand
murky gutter water
& the soiled-slush residue of the road

sober reality of concrete under foot
rigid november air
lungs mulling over moist carbon monoxide
stone faces droning past

as i wait to cross the street recalling the family farm
my father's grin as he wrestled with our dog
the smell of fresh rain on gravel
the purple smear of saskatoons on my hands

Children Play

- For Tricia & Jenni

you forget the feel of being
a kid in an elevator the first time
in a city away from one-storied stores
acrophobic townspeople
& now such a magical pull
of machinery to new heights
you jump just before movement falls
away with your weightless tummy
reaching after that feeling that
feeling you forget
you are
in a transit station
watching a little girl
run up a down escalator
trying so hard to get nowhere
& laughing pointless
expenditure of energy
the coin of pleasure
you are remembering

a boyhood spent
on a farm where your little sister lives
where the only train you knew
was the one that stopped in town
to empty grain elevators

but now you take a train downtown each day
of the week a rush of tunnel
in your ears walled lights winking
outside your window your imagination
where you invent a little girl
running up & down the aisle
burning joyous energy between dull faces
sometimes screaming with delight & it stays
inside your imagination

still sometimes you like to remember
a fictional past
where your sister was with you
going downtown on a city train
you recall how she ran for you
cracked that crowd's stone facade
destroyed it
with giggles

Men Gather Firewood

you forget
    the feel of a chainsaw brutally
    buzzing in your hands a beast
    rumbling to a scream.
    poplar ripped to dust & chips
    crushed beneath your steel-toed winter boots.

    the timid way that 12 year-old
    scared cold stiff ran
    one of two ravenous machines
    conversing in a cruel language.
    foraged on a brushpile in the snow
    learned the skill
    the strength of his loved
    & dangerous father.

it's stored in bone
(that bond) that buzzing
a ringing in my ears tonight
a wordless voice

that fades to a hum that lulls me
to sleep becomes a dream
of a tune my mother hummed
by my crib before
i could remember.

Dinner Parties

in my family people dropped by
for coffee or to stay for supper
& they were always the same
people: the old friend
the housewife gossip
the guy dad worked with

i remember pilsner beer & labatt's blue
baby duck on special occasions
all the adults at the kitchen table
on patched chairs or spilling over
onto stacking stools
laughter & dad's booming voice
you could hear everywhere
in our trailer
loud in the living room
where my two sisters & i
tried to watch t.v.
turning up the volume with theirs
according to mom's threshold
(turn that down!)
barred from the grown-up society
of mechanics farmhands welders
farmers & country wives
who talked about the price of wheat
the lack of rain (if it was summer)
& corrupt politicians (all year round)

one time a shy man came by
with some other guys dad worked with
& their loud man voices
drowned out the t.v. & i gave up
played table-top hockey by myself
about as fun as playing real hockey
alone
& this shy man wandered into the room
away from conversations
he couldn't handle &
adapting instantly to my age
he sat down to play god (his hand)

intervened to score a goal
gave my players injuries
by removing them from their pegs
& he kept me laughing with his play
by play commentary
unlike in the adult world we didn't
talk much we just exchanged names
played like we were both little kids
& then brian left
returned to the social
conventions of his age

* * *

but you
you had *dinners*
all the social graces & you are
at ease in idle chatter
uncomfortable in silence
i picture wine & you
at a fancy table as a little girl
everyone seated before placemats
& adults asking you about school
hoping for professional aspirations
expecting conversation
& on that same night
me phoning you
trying to tell you
about that shy man
& a moment of communion
that would be remembered forever
but saying nothing
a shy boy
as you
uneasy
filled my silent groping gaps
with something you were watching
on t.v.

Intimate

grain-lines on a plywood bedroom wall
in the darkness before dreams
connected my bed with heaven

but stopped at the ceiling

wall-sticker placed in purgatory:
"God is as near as a whispered prayer."

a boy in boding blackness
    covers concealing
    thoughts reeling with nocturnal notions
    of deadly demons satanic spirits
    the Devil's dogs
    brutes bodies beasts
    mangled monsters
whispering "Our father let me sleep and *live*"
& granted serenity
surviving

tonight:
    in the shadow of the bomb
    images from the day's media blitz
    macabring in my mind
an attempt at sleep &

a whispered God whispering

Iconography Of The Fence

the icons
of our elementary affection
remind me of the chain-link fence
that was the boundary
of our recess romance:

our hands holding
above the bridge
of monkey bars over
which we dangled our legs
    linking
    & we were one
    creature: three legs one heart

our faces meeting
below a ridge
of sliding-snow down
which we tumbled our lips
    joining
    & snow melted
    into a single liquid world

our bodies embracing
on the edge
of a field on
which we fumbled our lives
    uniting
    & two pasts two presents
    became part of one future:

fences are finite
but when we left that school
i was surprised to find
we were too

Crossing

as kids grade seven students
of the world behind your parents' house
we would walk along the worn paths
beside the town's drainage ditches
one time we tried to cross one
filled with flowing spring run-off
by using one of the dikes as a bridge
you first of course
while i watched an anxious spectator
of your one girl circus
your tightrope performance
on six inch wide corrugated steel

but your father
a voice shouting disapproval
across his patio deck
across wild green grasses
lining our path to this place
prevented you from
completing your act
so together instead
we went the long safe way around

but when you outgrew the authority
of your father's voice
how you balanced
precariously in your crossing
& i could not watch

In Memory (Of Two Fools): Surviving

& being 16 years old
riding in your friend's first car
    (you know—the one that took
    a quart of oil every 60 miles
    the one you slammed the door on
    your girlfriend that time left her
    standing on that road 2 miles from town
    tires spitting gravel angrily at her
    feet as you raced off reckless

& being so bored
with the 30 second drive
up mainstreet
(in heavy traffic)
you try for speed
records going from small town
to smaller
    (remember? grinning like idiots
    windows rolled down
    wind rushing in rock 'n' roll blasting out
    startling magpies blurring by
    with fields & trees & grasses
    lining fast receding ditches
    & the edge of asphalt
    that was our only boundary

& taking that sharp curve
on the old highway
    pavement packed upon an old
    wagon trail built by the daily
    tracks of early settlers
where skid marks are all we leave behind
& other kids died breaking
the limits of speed & boredom
& this road

From One To The Other

the aliens in the movie
hooked up human bodies
to power their ship
so they could get back
to there from here

once going from here to there
my car hit a gopher
but i never thought
i was some monster
in the plot of the poor creature's life

i drove on
hurried by images of home
my foot pressed on the petal squeezing
processed life toward ignition

The Rock

the scientist studying
the rock dividing
it into component metals strata
layers of significance

the poet wondering
not how the elements
come together but how the whole
rock works
as tool as weapon as warm
receptacle of summer sun
as a $199.99 liability
when it hits your windshield
at 110 km/h

A Portrait Of The Artist As A Tongue Man

steve
the unemployed writer
has found a job
at a meat-packing plant
packaging cow tongues
on a disassembly line

steve's a vegetarian

The World Beyond

- 1 -

bonfire in middle of field
trees dripping rain ringing field fire
four hundred teenagers standing stumbling
drinking beer & coolers
all night
most of morning

craig & me marking our progress with empty bottles
craig & me singing songs of friendship slurred
craig & lysa kissing under night shaded leaves
damp dark grass aching to burst green

one wild grad party out in the bush
farmer's field outside of town

- 2 -

staggering drunk with the night
(or was it the beer—could it have been the beer?)
back to the buses that would bring us back
to reality
i saw lysa's face clear unintoxicated
in the first light hints of dawn
her wet blond curls made brown with
beer & rain & love
love hanging in the air
above reeking drunk kids & someone
puking in a ditch by the road & somewhere
craig was holding her white hand
while she watched images reflected on bus windows
with disinterested attention
as if she were something new
from da Vinci
or a 17 year old angel
i could never touch
barely aware of the boy
she had baptized communed with
confessed to & confirmed

under spring drenched trees
an underling in her church
i watched her like the fire
from a distance

- 3 -

five years later
in a mood for prayer
i called her up to see if
she remembered me &
somewhere in the world
beyond the phone receiver
i heard her two year old son pestering
dishes banging in the sink
t.v. in the background

not much to talk about
after remembering names

she had a baby & got married

i gotta tell craig about it
if i ever see him again

Two Modes

i have no problem
getting from
nowhere to
now here

but trying to get to
know her
i get nowhere

Two Pictures (In My Mind)

One: a friend & i frozen
within the frame: snow drifts
up to our hips
one leg each lifting
a skidoo boot from the clench of snow.
there is an arch in our backs
that might suggest confidence
beneath our heavy winter coats.
in the corner of the picture
the front end of a school bus
is buried by a drift.
its passengers are peering through clear patches
on frosted windows.

they might guess
(but you might not)
that my friend & i are walking slowly
the quartermile to the nearest neighbour
whose tractor could pull the bus out.

The other: my cousin & i captured
on a bus in august heat sweat drips
from our teenage lips.
i am slouched down awkwardly
trying to copy my cousin's assurance
whose legs are stretched out to the aisle.
there is a piece of gum
clinging to my shoe
that might suggest incompetence
beneath my jeans & t-shirt.
on the picture's edge other passengers
turn moist faces from cruel windows.

if you were to see this picture
you might guess
(but they might not)
this was my first time on a city bus
for at the centre are my eyes
& even in the light they are wide
with wonder & fear
you can almost hear them whimper:
    where are we
    going
    how do we get off

Edmonton: High Level Bridge

quickly walking across
crazy common human impulse to jump
i notice birds
observing me
sideways stares from girders
then scattering into sky as i approach

i like them
they take my fear of falling
under wing
spread wings drop
& soar banks
river & long steel trestles
indifferent aspects
of the space in which they travel
posing no more danger
than the distance between ladder rungs
represents for me

i like them
want to fall
from perch & fly
flout gravity with arms outstretched
wings spread graceful calm & wide
as if to catch
all air in a massive embrace claim
more territory
than floating continents
or the raging element of sea
just letting go
knowing descent & death
is not the only possibility

the birds
with their simple eyes
seeing two directions at once
i like them
they take my fear of falling
& fly

The Wonderful Bird Lady

when you first see her
    this large shambling woman
    old & bent
    searching for loose change
you wonder

why they call her the bird
lady   until she chirps
her charity call as you pass
a kind of smooth parrot
imitation:
        y' gotta quarter?
        gotta quarter?

then   your mind might push
the metaphor further & wonder
where her nest is   or
if she no longer has one
how she came to fall
out of the tree

you might think
about broken wings
    (& minds

    or wonder
does she remember
flight

That Night

that night driving
from camrose in my dad's
car on a winter highway
to whitecourt watching snow
assault the windshield
thinking about the windchill factor
hating your father
wondering at what temperature
flesh freezes
feeling
trees touching/brushing past
the window view
frozen firs sprucing up the landscape
with their defiant green needles
pricking my mind
your father
figure of authority
forbidding me to stay
my soul white snow
falling green needles
missing you

* * *

that night parked
a block from his house
the whir of the heater
romantic purr
your summer eyes meeting
mine cutting the cold
crisp clear night calmness
close to curfew
your shy fingers lightly
touching my hand tightly
holding yours
carrying my soul away
outside chimneys puffing
smoke
rising to the sky
above fresh snow

* * *

that night sleeping
in my car coats blankets
sweaters starting
the car every hour to stop
shivering thinking
about you dreaming
about the bedroom
where you were sleeping
touching the frost on the window
breathing ice
hand print on the glass

* * *

that morning & you
rising early to wake me
dawn hugs in december
amorous embers
souls touching sunlight
touching snow melting
the silhouette of a hand
upon a window
evergreens stretching into the day

—& we would have kissed—(but)

that bitter blast of memories
of past nights blew
touching your soul uncovered
a six year old in a nightie
crying shivering
your father touching
in the darkness of his room

& there was no windshield
as i breathed that night
ash-laden snow
falling on frozen needles

Breakfast In Bed

strawberries on my cornflakes
are the fruits of love
my father the amateur gardener
picked for us last summer

they flavour sweet a bitter memory
of another summer
when my wife was seventeen
& the crown brought indecent assault charges
against her father
& a social worker assessed her & sent her
to stay with helmut & gertraud
volunteer emergency caregivers
& i drove three hundred miles that night
to see her
        to see her
crying
crumpled on the couch
oblivious to gertraud's soothing
sounds like prayer repeating
in my mind our Father
Thy Kingdom come
as we forgive those who

later helmut offered us strawberries
in the face of what we could not do
we ate & it was good

preparation for the salt taste of tears
the test of love in our years to come

Cindy: 19 & Glad To Be Alive

the photograph of her
face turned full smile
toward the camera of her
fingers content to be
interlocked on the edge of a table
spread with chinese food
surrounded by friends of her
arms covered by the old blue sweater
we've shared through difficult years of her
body beside a night-filled window
where the restaurant's extended lighted
sign can be partly seen
promising DELIVERY

is in a frame on her desk
to which she's attached her fortune
cookie's forecast:
Your life will be happy and peaceful.

& this photo shows
she knows life
is not always a series of negative
predictions come true
sometimes it is smiling
in the face of the future
sometimes it is a happy union
of the past present

& possible

Spring 1990

pigeon
peacefully pecks pebbles
picnics on
puddled pavement
    but
walking on the sidewalk wonder
fully alive the world sings
sunshine & the apartments/nineteen stories of babel
strain to reach its highest note—
grey soprano rising above
dull-brick tenement tenors below
while the blue sky
pleasantly puffing random clouds easeful
reclines lazily & remains a
part & a chorus of brown grass supplants
snow serenades sun
light celebrates thawing as calm air
flows fresh through ready bare bushes
branches over the moist
tanned blankets of the perennials & the world
becomes a great song of wet
smells uncovered odours to joy
while my nose inhales a symphony
    i only feel blueblur

pigeon shuffle-waddling puffing chest
grace & dignity ahead of me excited
i walk faster nearer
i want to touch the proud feathers
smooth blue & grey share more
closely its beauty & our experience here
together but too close—

its timid look quick spring up
wings spread—a ripple of sky & cloud
on the verge of blue a sudden fan
tastic surge of

it lands only so near
keeping its distance.
  but there is its beautiful blue
  & sky
  & damp dark grass aching to burst green
  & melted smells trickling in the gutter
  & there are the drab proud buildings
  & that sky &
  God keeping His distance as if
  i had committed the sin.

home now
she/i can't wait
hug greeting at the door
she radiates as if
blue specked her brown eyes
apart now she clasps my hand
excited smiling she says
  you know what i saw today
  two love birds in a tree!
delicious joy in her face she moves
closer—anearwhisper:

  and they were singing!

Edmonton Legislature Underpass

there are doves
engraved along the concrete walls
forever flying with the flow
of traffic teeming past
through the legislature underpass
they tell a story of peace
moving with the masses
of cars for a few hundred meters
flashing onto passengers'
windows whizzing by
broken with the breaking of the sky

& if you walk
along the sidestream you see
other birds
    smashed by the glass of windshields
    an unexpected crack in their path
    or a quiet violence: choking on exhaust
    fumes—the fuming of the inhuman race
crumpled casualties
on dead cement beneath
carved doves

Pieces

socks & shoes & underwear
you see by the side of the road
& you imagine wild
automobile orgies
life in the fast lane
or a drunken striptease
as someone staggers home

but it's the one sock one
shoe that makes you think
about someone's party ending
suddenly revelers sobered
in the middle of struggling
to complete the pair
feeling foolish & afraid
half-way there

you might imagine a man
with one sock & no shoes
in his underwear
entering his dark apartment

he doesn't turn on the light
& when he washes up
he doesn't see himself in the mirror

The Soft Rains That Come

not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
if she perished utterly

* * *

whenever the rain stops now
she likes to walk
beneath the dovelike trees
breathing in the blossoms
always in her peaceful hand
a white piece of chalk
to outline bodies on the sidewalk
bodies she's seen sprawled
on the screen of her tv

when the gentle rain begins again
these sketches of her
thoughts dissolve & swirl away
leave no scars
on the cement

& she goes back inside her house
her head
where the silhouettes are fleshed
out between commercials
& miscued neurons
mirages in the desert
ranges of her mind

Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep

this is the way the world ends
not with a bang but a whisper

* * *

there is something beautiful about a city
composed of quiet streets cars
unmoving everyone sleeping soundly
in the unlit recesses of locked houses
while heating registers breathe
exhale warm air
& perpetual machinery hums
in empty office towers
in dim corridors of
factories whose owners have forgotten
their black smokestacks that no longer
puff insults to clouds
someone dreams of the drone
of an airplane approaching in harmony
with the low buzz of voltage
on wires threaded throughout the city
stitches holding together a patch-work quilt
of streets at perfect angles
grand mansions low-income housing
apartment buildings shopping malls
fabricated existence
holding back prairie & forest & mountains &
beasts holding in
now vacant parks of green
neatly trimmed grass we could not resist
that would remind
us who cannot now be
reminded
connecting street lights that change for some
unseen God watching
from above perhaps
with admiration
the delightfulness of design architecture
marvelling at how we actually followed

in His footsteps
a chip off the old
Rock
perhaps this was the problem

our creation & His creation
were just incompatible
our modification of His art
& His unwillingness to change
but no one was to blame
we simply could not live
together

* * *

climbing into bed for the last time
i breathe a prayer & almost whisper
"sorry" before closing my eyes
but i feel wind through an open window
telling me it isn't necessary
& for the first time in my life
God answers my prayer
as cold night air flows over covers

no hard feelings

tucks me in
tells me everything will be okay
when i don't wake up

In His Image

the thermostat needle has gone
off the far end of the scale
in my apartment an electric fan blows
stale air in my face
seated & sweating
with the exercise of breath
i am being tortured
into writing this poem

tonight there will be a thunderstorm

it will be a rock concert
i will watch from my balcony
tree leaves will be whipped
by wind into applause
dusty streets will be beaten
by raining rhythms
& the lawn & weeds will be bent
to the strains of this midsummer music

lightning will be God's pyrotechnics
water dripping from my head
will be the sweat
of His art

Aftermath

her anger filled the room

& she left the sun straight
edging through window & dust
beating down on shoe marks
beside a pile of dead flies
& a satisfied swatter resting
testimonially
on the hardwood floor

In The Country (Without Screen Windows)

(portrait of a fly in four parts)

1.

in the kitchen i play C
on the portable keyboard
over & over
fascinated by my new-found ability
to press keys into music
i cannot find a way to end my song

jay (two years old) scribbles
a continuous series of loops
fascinated by his ability to draw
out colours from a crayon

a fly crawls nonchalantly
across his tableau

2.

a fly rests
on the t.v. screen
on the helmet of a soldier
just about to die

"you'd think they'd get the idea
to get lost when they see their buddies dead"
cindy had said that afternoon
killing flies in the living room

half the platoon is dead now
still they're holding out
in a german farmhouse

3

it is dinner
we are saying grace
"dear Lord thank you for our food
thank you for blessing us
with our health our family our friends"
this life

out of the corner of my open eye
i spy a fly
dying in the sauce on our barbecued steak

4

the dead fly
& its buddy who is alive &
clawing the body
exploring the gore
feeding on the flesh of a brother

the painting on the wall
of the quaint farmhouse before
the bank foreclosed

another fly
wading through wheat

Frogs & Company

tonight my little cousin catches them
twenty-two years old i can watch
even hold the jars
while he drops the croaking critters
into their new home

once out on the farm
cindy called on my services
as a man i could only shoo
the toad out of the cellar
with a piece of cardboard
ribbitty hippity hop
over the threshold & out

comes another memory
of days spent hunting
swallows & squirrels
but those were lead pellets
not fingers firmly attached
to my heart

today reading Atwood's *Surfacing*
the part where she hooks a live frog
i felt squeamish
wriggled in my chair
& something else surfaced

a day on the lake
with my girlfriend
& the fish i caught drowning
on the bottom of our boat
because i could not smash its head

& the first & last time
i butchered a chicken
only mincing its beak
with the first two machete chops
but then the third

    & legs quivering
    in my fingers

In The Beginnings

i am 12 years old alone
in david's room david
my friend who is 14 & has everything
warplane models still
in their genesis with bright
painted parts lying on glued &
paint-stained newspaper
on his old student's desk
i'm now going through drawers
of old broken army knives
toy soldiers sgt. rock comics
the remote controller parts
for the plastic tank we destroyed last week
i peek under the bed to see
his brand new 100 shot bb gun
its barrel smooth blue-grey perfect
in my hands when i pull it out
& the polished stock
flawless against my shoulder
as i sight on the wall
one of his poster-
girls demonstrating the genesis
of bare-naked splendour then
the poster-cars with their chrome-perfect
pipes erect in the middle of their hoods
in the closet i find stacks of playboy
& penthouse housing pent-up
knowledge i am stealing
one for further study.

i am 15 years old listening to david
tell me about the first time
he & lisa did it
it happened in his room
when his parents were away
he is laughing
telling me about blood
on his white sheets
he had to wash 3 times
so his mom would never know

i am 21 years old & thinking
about the blood of experience
seeping into that room staining
my conception
of the genesis of men

in the beginnings was the war
& the war became flesh.

we were making men in our image
& it was not good

Her First Time

because her boyfriend was not there
    but would be moving soon
    eight hundred miles to be near her
i was the one she asked for a ride
to the doctor's
so she could go on the pill

it was not yet spring & we waited in my car
for the engine to warm us
we talked nervously of things
i don't remember
she turned on the radio & we listened to
"I Wanna Sex You Up"
"All I Wanna Do Is Make Love To You"
when "You Make My Temperature Rise" played
the car was warm & i had to smile
but she still shivered

on our way home
i tried to imagine
how she must have felt
after the doctor's instrument
while around us silence widened

there was an opening
in our thoughts filling
not with images of love or sex
but cold stainless steel

Silence Again

silence again
haven't i said this before?
& the murmuring of air
a room encompassing stillness divided
by the rhythmic intervals
of a ticking clock
& my soft breathing here in
this delicate atmosphere
my thoughts pound ringing sharp
like steel on steel thoughts of the sun
bursting summer the explosion
of colours clamour clash
of sounds as similar as smalltown parade bands
& flitting swallows in a hollow
old barn or swish of bikes over gravel
& splash of water in swimming pools
clear cool water
& you

summer & you filling this empty place
now the pulsing of brightness
that hint of afternoon
warmth & gentle whispers
of poplars murmurs
of grass & your eyes
glinting an inviting room

then ebbing like seasons or thoughts
tranquillity conquers
as somewhere a tanned angel *splishes*
one final dive in the pool
& a drop breaks on cement
becoming the first of the relentless seconds
ticking on my outdated clock
as i think of you in
silence again

Token Sex Poem

we stand &

t
h k
i i
s s
s
moves two *i*'s
closer is
our closed eyes'
ambassador to
bliss they cannot see

this
kiss

is
now a union of *i*'s
who have fallen into
horizontal love

On The Verge Of Nightmare

& when i dream i dream
of walking where town meets trees
our hands holding
our hearts in this grey area

it is fall
& trees have no leaves to conceal us
from other lovers on similar paths
but we kiss anyway
(never dreaming when i awake
you'll be walking with another)

& brazenly carve our love
into trees (that will grow
each year until initials disappear)
but secrets' sculpture lasts?

& when i say i love you
i mean to say
you're my best friend

but (in the dream)
because we're the kind that kissed
our friendship has to end

The Extended Version

friday night dancefloor
& she is surrounded
by men dress-coded proper
shirts & ties & polished shoes
no caps allowed on their uniformly
short-cropped sears catalogue hair
(the adamant blue jays fan refused
to conform turned himself away
at the door)
she is surrounded
by women
who do not concern her.
her body curves
rises falls following
the undulations of yet another
electronic assimilation of familiar chords
syncopated machine music
remixed the extended version
she dances in the pulsing pulsating
lights beat yellow beat green
between flickering flashing strobes
strokes of red flash yellow beat
flaring beat green in blaring fake fog air
her hair swinging wild a gesture
of freedom of her body moving
rhythmically graceful in its interpretation
of the language of power-
packed speakers preaching catharsis

& when seven minutes of heaven have ended
she returns to her table with boys
who think they are men
she may go home
with one
she may not
since she feels no connection
except to the music the necessary oblivion
of drowning in a sea of pounding sound
where she can laugh unrestrained
or scream
& no one can tell the difference
the one she danced with last
had matched her shout
mistaking it for reckless abandon
confirmation of the success
he is dressed for

now he stares selfishly at her
& she wonders if she is an extended version
of a song that should have long since ended
but the thought will vanish as quickly as this night
that holds the promise of a drug that numbs
though tonight it's taking longer
sipping from her rum & coke she imagines
she sees her own reflection
among ice cubes slowly melting
pop discarbonating itself
she feels a pressure pushing on her chest
& quickly she downs her drink
dumps the ice in an ashtray
& heads back to the dancefloor
where the music swallows her like a hungry ocean

submerged she screams
lungs releasing bubbles
that will not break the surface

In Response To Perceived Cruelty In His Poem

a poem should not mean but be
mean

The Fictional Clairvoyant In Translation

i will be watching from my balcony
something ominous will be swirling
in the air a whiff of cows'
sweat before butchering
begins that morning
in our friendly neighbourhood
slaughterhouse & meat-packing plant

you will be walking
a dog with a nose for
danger down the alley
between dented garbage cans
filled with the product conversions
of families whose broken fences
& unmowed lawns are such a change
to your suburban eyes

i will see
& your dog will smell
the figure who will rob you
of your self
assurance your doubt
in my power to see the future

adrenaline will race to human
speech quicker than a bark
but too late
& the thief who will have stolen
your money to buy a chemical reality
will have transformed
your experience of one ordinary morning
into nightmares you will often have

remember:
i am watching
i will be watching
i will have watched

An English Graduate Goes Out With The Boys

it is snowing
we are discontented
& i refrain from quoting shakespeare
as we sit sullen
inside a dark half-empty bar
we are five men drinking beer
(but i will not invoke purdy either)

for these are my friends
my companions since kindergarten
our lives shaped in the same place
we all came to love but left
—& they have not grown to love
this world of words i inhabit
this other dimension of books
of prose & poetry that throws
my winter blues into shimmering relief

when i join them in conversations
such as this one years beyond
our hometown & high school graduation
talking of cars girls politics sports
my mind fills with fictitious memories
    gatsby's yellow "death car"
    helen of troy "that peerless dame of greece"
    gloucester & the citizens of london
    shoeless joe & a field of dreams
& i am half in their world half out
bilingual
speaking half a language

Sunflower

15 year old rosalie
sits on a worn recliner
cracking sunflower seeds
sunlight streams through a tear
in the blind spotlighting
the small pile of shells growing
on her knee

she watches her friend
who just turned 16
sitting with a 23 year old
boyfriend fondling
on his second-hand couch

& lionel (also 23) is fond
of rosalie he wrestles with her
like her father used to & he wins
her chair so she seats herself
on his knee
with one hand on her jeaned bottom
lionel's other hand is trying
to get inside her
uninteresting shirt

rosalie splits another seed
chews its prize
& spits a broken shell
at lionel
who is touching her breast

Smoke

let the thoughts rise to the surface

i'm in a classroom
looking at black
chalkboards but i see fire
flaming on chalk smears
in my mind

robert & i out at the golf course
our first jobs
& it was our turn to watch the burning
brush piles where they'd cleared
land for another nine holes
& i remember i had frozen
iced tea melting
in an old two litre plastic pop bottle
he had a can of coke
resting on the gas tank of the trike

but all i can see of his face is blurred
charcoal on skin
we must've had dust all over
our bodies
his black hair & the wind
toying with strands & the hot sun
above a roaring bonfire
& him just sitting there on the trike

still the image is clear
even the label on my iced tea bottle
classic coke with edges frayed
& the field desecrated plowed lumps
roots crumpled leaves
black overturned soil
drying into dust under baking sun as
still we sat withering
in the searing heat of the day
three days in a row
quiet
posed against the landscape
tired sentries

but i cannot see his eyes

three years ago
yet it all floats to the surface
on a wave of flame
a blackboard in an empty classroom

what is it saying
about that other day in a bad blizzard
when robert's truck hit a rig head on
leaving burning wreckage
smoke rising into night air
& an eighteen year old body
dead in bloodied snow
posed against a white world

Falling Into Winter

wishing it would snow
i watch the sky hoping
for respite from the dying
earth bare trees biting
purposeless wind
while we're all just hanging

in the balance between seasons
between one & two
o'clock sunday morning
when we finally go back
from daylight savings
time & i restless
want to settle down
guiltless on my soft couch
by the heat register
away from grey
dull rocks from drab brown
pointless grass from this wasting
old man called fall
but all i have are dreams
of an arctic youth in asia
who will not enter
this stark country
will not turn the machine off
kill this living death

snow:
order my universe
to submit to beautiful blandness
in one blank sweep
show me a bright white puzzle
falling into completion

Falls

in the student newspaper

Help, I lost my engagement ring outside the Fine Arts Building. If you have found a diamond ring in the area, please turn it in to Campus Security.

the ad ran for the entire term

summer confirmed the loss for one

* * *

in bullwinkle's parking lot

two adults three children
with three floating balloons
when one loses
his hold on the string & his balloon
drifts away falling skyward
his siblings secure
as scientists study what could never happen
to them the adults watch helpless
while his expression pauses
in that strange state between realizing
you're alone in your misfortune
& bawling your head off

i saw this
on the corner waiting for the light
to say walk
a flashing orange hand
holding me there

* * *

in front of my house

my nephew & i walking
when half my popsicle fell to the dirt
he looked up at me
not wanting to believe
in life's propensity for tragedy
"are you still going to eat it"
he hoped

* * *

at the bus stop

first day of college classes
a pretty young woman in white
a slippery step
a mud puddle

i never said this before
but miss i know the effect
you'd hoped for
& i saw you crying
when it was ruined

when your instructor took attendance that day
she never knew the reason
behind the silence
when she called your name

* * *

at my desk:

words tumble free
falling i count down
to impact

The Sun Makes Spectrums On Wet Spider Webs

she turns
brown beautiful
eyes
from the front of the class
this top of the class
english student
her morning long
brown hair made browner by rain
outside people run for cover

but here we're sheltered caught
in a discussion & her eyes
reflect like raindrops
on the meaninglessness of words
slippery web of language

but was it morning mind or mane?
my subject's eyes are nothing like the rain

Unknown Territory

they drop their nets fish
for luck beneath their boat

like we drop our lines
hope for a fish we haven't caught

until the man with the sonar
maps our imagination

steals the eye of God

Chartered Thoughts

Whereas Canada

notwithstanding quebec
this united dominion (french
for kingdom) in which
you can be strong & free
to buy cheaper american products
& your true patriot love
may be expressed on election day
in the changing of dictatorships

is founded upon principles

i remember a man & a mania
a finger flashed in a train window
the god of nationalism delivered us
the national energy programme
what's good for the goose is good
for the goose

that recognize the supremacy of God

class prayer is not allowed
in our public schools

goddamnit shut up
my ss 10 teacher screamed
at approximately 9:26 may 6 1987
at grimshaw holy family roman
catholic separate school

and the rule of law

fuck you
said victor
to his art 10 teacher
& walked out exercising
his freedom of speech
& movement
he was expelled for 3 days

they later became friends
& sometimes we'd see them
out behind the gym after school
sharing a joint
& laughing

Emotions

are too subjective
the difference between
happy & sad
love & not love
is not quantitative
like the answers to the question
"at what point does the cheek
become the chin?"
a matter for conjecture

but if emotions were exact
standardized & assigned
a number
we would be precise
perhaps describe the difference
as 13 6 or 49

& we might agree that integers
would indicate normal feelings
so the emotionally unstable
would register irrational numbers
so relationships would be an easy
matter of managing equations:

ya know i feel 6 today
an' what with you bein' 10 an' all
we'd just put each other in a 16 mood
so maybe this wouldn't be good time to—

actually i'm not really 10
i'm feelin' kinda 9 point 33—

whoa baby you need help

& we might even go beyond
peace or victory or f-off
by extending certain digits
of our hands 5 + 5
might mean more than it does now

but 2 + 2 would always be for
describing the way i feel
what you feel
when our eyes still reflect each other

& 1 + 1 would be to
show these moments of empathy
to the world represent
our union like hearts
we used to draw with added initials

would be a better
more accurate
binomial expression

Sum Of My Existence

in university
we did the things lovers often do:
    added our initials in fresh concrete
    held hands against halls of single-files
    signed our notes with secret nicknames

now that we share not just a name
but the same bank account number
i find myself remembering
a more important symbolic act
of our early love:

    our memorization of each other's
    student i.d. numbers

for when we saw them on lists of posted grades
or on letters from the registrar
we knew what the digits really represented

& if we added our i.d.'s together
the sum was a number
no one else could have

Fingers

when he wrote about the typist's fingers
tapping erotic messages
brailling a trail on his back

it was almost as if he knew
my mathematician
the way she multiplies pleasure
with her integral body
especially that set of
fingers
proving the secret power
of digits:

base ten communication
in the binary system of love

These Are The Times

ruffles on her graduation dress dancing
the satin folds my hands pressed

she works her hands into calluses
for her father's trenching company

denim workclothes mud-cracked
protect the smooth skin of my old dreams

but not this memory

A Lesson In Forms

meeting a former high school infatuation
i discover many things:

that her body was a passing fad
her hair colour was fake
& its curls that beguiled
weren't permanent at all

that i still keep the uncorrupted image

that it forms a platonic argument
against the fickleness of earthly love

She Is

she was:

the subject of a poem
i wrote when i was fourteen
that won fifty dollars in a contest

the only girl
who ever asked me for advice
about learning to play the drums

a crush
on my unfolding heart

the object of high school critical gossip:
a diabetic who ate drank & partied
past the limits of her body
as if life was too brief to live
cautiously

the first one
who let my best friend touch her there

the one he left
standing on a road four miles from town
because he could not stand her
drunken insults
uninhibited laughter
unpredictable pulling of the emergency brake

a teenager who became pregnant
& stopped drinking & smoking
all on her own
because her lover left her
& she was the mother of a baby boy

a twenty year old body
to the rcmp officer
who found her in her bathroom

a frightening mystery
to her one year old son
who sat on her back in the bathtub
crying not understanding seizures
can make a woman sleep forever
(even one who had learned to live
as if her life was not long enough
to love him with

the reason my mother called me today

My Cup Runneth Over

my dad & his brothers & sisters never had
much candy when they were kids
too poor & working stomachs needed
the basic food groups
before money could be wasted
on unnecessary pleasure

one day at my uncle's place
when i accepted another drink he offered
i recalled the way grandma always
stuffed me & my sisters
with cakes & cookies & candies
& pop (stored in cases in her basement)
filling up our cups
even though half-full

On Shaving

i have begun
using a regular razor
for years i've strictly been an electric man
since the first whiskers
fuzzed from my chin
maybe it was the generational thing
my father always
used a gillette replaceable blade
(& Brut
        for sensitive skin)
& i had to be different

now
years have pulled me
nearer to where my father once was
i get closer shaves with a blade
my face feels like dad's
& aftershave is the smell of week-day mornings

The Breaking (Grandpa's Funeral)

it was snow
freshwhite
crunching through silence & me
staring at it watching another pair of legs
blue specked dress pants
black shoes tied tight just polished
slight scuff on the left heel
raised dot/ridge pattern printed in snow
soon stamped again by my timed step

it was the weight of it all
casket pulling on my writing hand
limo waiting family waiting
priestly entourage waiting for the mass
we carried with us the breaking of the bread
breaking trail to the tombstone

it was the cold
my feet cold stones in dress shoes
dress socks grandma gave me
she cleaned out grandpa's
dresser dress her in black

it was my distracted mind
the amplified echo of holy water
remembering shoes
the pulley's grind & sudden
stop grandma's shudder

it was crying

it was eyes more than anything
raising my head finally to see
the eyes of grandpa's son
frosting blue pools
melting snow

it was dad's eyes

Consider The Lilies

my professor has been promoted
so today his step is sprightly
to the podium
his knees are a joint
venture between hydraulic muscles
anchored on either side
an effort to absorb
the bounce of middle age
spread & still spreading
beneath a suit in which we're used
to seeing him lecture

but picture this instead. me
slouched down drowsy behind
a freshman his hair shaved short
his head an oval of sleeping brain tissue
partially blocking my view of the professor's
gut at eye level alive & jiggling
juxtaposition of the animated & the inanimate
ironic contrast as the professor
tries to provide illumination with his mind
while i concentrate on a stubbled head
& love handles framing

but this is not the significant image
it is a distraction from this freshman
& the expensive leather of his attaché case
from his shirt i know is worth more
than our heavy texts
& his designer leather jacket
bright black to match immaculate
polished shoes to match
my church full of memories
of once-a-week christians
dressed to perfection

this is a sign that points out appearance
has a way of diverting my
eye omniscient i
pronounce the future
he will not pass this course
& while the professor talks the freshman wonders
if he remembered to turn off the lights on
his camero does not think
about his father who ministers
to his every need

  i process thought
  in a world designed for diversion
  a world of layers
  which we supplement faithfully
  like an RRSP or a pastiche of ironies

a world in which an undergraduate
overdressed
faces higher learning
with his father's
higher earning
potential will never be realized
through him
with him
in him
all glory & honour be yours father
now & forever
amen

Poster Poem #2

reading the gospel
on a balcony at night

above moths too
are drawn to the light

Letters

one a few words from my mother
including my certificate of birth
(born & named january 18 1971
registered january 22)
which i'll keep in my purse
by the photo of my fiancé

including my certificate of baptism
(february 7) confirming my name
in the christian church signifying
salvation eternal life

including my certificate of adoption
(completed this tuesday
the 14th day of may a d. 1974)
in which *it is ordered and adjudged*
that i shall hereafter
bear my christian & (new) surname

including a sample wedding invitation
on which in formal script
this name's last day is proclaimed
(*saturday july 31 1993*)

* * *

another: from evergreen memorial gardens
a reminder of where all this is going

i think i'll send for their special
pamphlet on *upright monument sections*

i want my name in stone
when i am nothing
more than dust & ashes

She Shows A Shell To A Prairie Boy

she shows me a shell &

i'm back on a beach in nanaimo
standing on a jut of rocks barnacles
beneath my sneakers
ancient rock strange new
smell of life living
swell of ocean green & going & coming &
going away was like this for me
coming from smalltown alberta farms & forest
heart pulled between cutline & coastline
so beautiful so this ocean so—
i have no sea words for
those mountains like the rockies
seen from the other side the
first time on a real beach this is
my first time here i mean the first
time standing facing it pointing
there that's canada
that's my country

* * *

she shows me a shell &

i'm again skipping a shell across
sturgeon lake then
skipping from edmonton to toronto to ottawa
in a jet
i saw the great lakes once i thought
they were oceans

looking down from my window i said
there

* * *

she shows me a shell &

i think of a place in
vancouver or sydney i've
never seen much of
this country just the coming & going &
not much between ottawa & alberta &
the island of huge trees you can stand in

listen
    the first time on a beach i
    wore jeans & shoes
    afraid for creatures with scales
    i touched shells but did not
    feel
    ocean i feared tide but i
    felt safe on rocks like the
    piles on our farm

        * * *

she shows me a shell &

this is edmonton
it's out of place here & i am
back by the sea
a foreigner hundreds of miles
behind those mountains is home

looking from the outside
facing it
i say *there* but

        it is not canada
        i point to

In Flux

my poetry is clear
lines plowed down a stretch
of fertilized farmland
never quite as straight
as the theory of going
from point a to b.

is rows of vegetables
so straight when you kneel
at one end of the garden
& like a gun barrel line one up
with the saskatoon bush
at the other end of the plowed field
but all so crooked from the air
as seen in a photo
framed on my parents' kitchen wall

my poetry is this

& yellow lines dashing
down the highway from the rural
home of my first words
to uniform lines angling
into freeway meridians
& corporation buildings
unwavering in their ascent
above the spires of churches
in which i prayed for guidance
to get from a to b.

& satellite dishes pointing
their thin metal rods at God
receiving signals that have bounced

about the heavens some scrambled
some fuzzed with interference
since the transmission station
shot them half way round the world
so that the picture you see
framed on your t.v
is distorted

& so my poetry goes
from a to b & sometimes
c i plan my route
from point to point i pull
a line taut between stakes & plant
i draft a paper archetype
i send conflicting messages